



# Understanding Latino Parental Involvement in Education

Perceptions, Expectations, and Recommendations



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# Understanding Latino Parental Involvement in Education

Perceptions, Expectations, and Recommendations

By

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## ABOUT THIS STUDY

Latinos<sup>1</sup> have been continually overrepresented in low-skill and service sector U.S. jobs. One of the factors accounting for this is the educational experience of the Latino community, which has been characterized by low high school graduation rates, low college completion rates and substandard schooling conditions.<sup>2</sup> As schools and policymakers seek to improve the educational conditions of Latinos, parental influence in the form of school involvement is assumed to play some role in shaping students' educational experiences.

Despite this national interest in parental involvement, little research has been conducted on what constitutes parental involvement in the middle and high school years. Moreover, stakeholders hold diverse definitions of parental involvement, and little attention is paid to how Latino parents, specifically, define parental involvement.

This growing national interest in parental involvement and the lack of research on Latino perceptions on the issue motivated the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute (TRPI) to examine what constitutes parental involvement for schools, Latino students, and Latino parents.

In conducting this study, the Institute examined:

- Latino parents' perceptions of their participation in the education of their children.
- Schools' and teachers' expectations of parental involvement.
- Programmatic initiatives addressing parental involvement in education.
- Latino students' perceptions of the role of parental involvement in their education.

The findings of this study indicated that divergent definitions and perceptions of parental involvement in education exist among the different stakeholders. Moreover, the findings revealed that schools lack clear organizational goals and objectives on how best to involve parents in the schools. These insights can inform discussions about how schools can best acknowledge, encourage, and increase parental involvement in schools. School administrators, school board members, corporate school partners, policymakers, outreach programs, parent leaders, and teachers will discover the findings of the study useful as they seek to increase parental involvement in schools.

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1 TRPI uses the terms Latino and Hispanic interchangeably to refer to individuals who trace their origin or ancestry to the Spanish-speaking parts of Latin America and the Caribbean.

2 Chapa, J., & De la Rosa, B. (2004). Latino population growth, socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, and implications for educational attainment. *Education and Urban Society*, 36(2), 130-149.; Fry, R. (2003). Hispanic youth dropping out of U.S. schools: Measuring the challenge. Washington, D.C.: Pew Hispanic Center; Fry, R. (2002). Latinos in higher education: Many enroll, too few graduate. Washington, D.C.: The Pew Hispanic Center).

# KEY FINDINGS

## Parents’ Perceptions of What Constitutes Parental Involvement in Education

### Academic Involvement and Life Participation

Latino parents’ perceptions of parental involvement could be grouped into two distinct categories: academic involvement and life participation. Academic involvement was understood to encompass activities associated with homework, educational enrichment, and academic performance; life participation characterized ways that parents provided life education and were holistically integrated into their children’s lives in school, as well as away from it.

When asked to define parental involvement, Latino parents mentioned life participation more frequently than academic involvement.

PARENTS’ DEFINITIONS OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT	
Academic Involvement	Life Participation
Attend parent-teacher conferences.	Be aware of child’s life.
Sign homework as required by the teacher.	Be aware of and monitor child.
Know when to expect report cards.	Be aware of child’s peer group and interacting with peers’ parents.
Ask about homework daily.	Teach good morals and respect of others.
Listen to the child read.	Communicate with child.
Visit classroom during open houses.	Be aware of and encourage child’s abilities and career aspirations.
Ask questions about homework.	Provide general encouragement.
Ask friends, siblings, and other family members for homework help for child.	Discuss future planning.
Have high standards for academic performance.	Monitor school attendance.
Purchase materials required for class.	Exercise discipline and provide behavioral cuing.
Drive them to tutoring and school activities.	Establish trust with child.
Go to the library with them.	Provide advice on life issues.
Be present when required to pick up report cards at school.	Warn of dangers outside the home, such as illegal drugs.
	Get to know teachers to assess child’s safety.
	Volunteer to observe school environment.
	Encourage siblings to look out for each other.

**When asked to define parental involvement in education, Latino parents mentioned participation in their children’s lives more frequently than academic involvement.**



Latino parents' perspectives on the importance of life education (or *educación*) in combination with formal education have been documented in other research.<sup>3</sup> In this perspective, Latino parents equate involvement in their child's education with involvement in their lives: participation in their children's lives ensures that their formal schooling is complemented with *educación* taught in the home. Parents believed that monitoring their children's lives and providing moral guidance resulted in good classroom behavior, which in turn allowed for greater academic learning opportunities. Awareness of their children's lives also led to increased trust and communication with students, and it allowed for timely intervention if a child deviated in his or her behavior. Finally, parents felt that it was their end of an unspoken agreement with the school to holistically educate the child. Said one Los Angeles parent, "At home, [life education] is part two of the school."

Participants in the English-speaking focus groups, whom one would expect to be more acculturated than Spanish-speaking Latinos, were as committed to the importance of educating a child academically and morally as their Spanish-speaking cohorts.

## Parents' Perceived Challenges to Parental Involvement in School

### Providing Homework Assistance

Latino parents mentioned helping with homework but simultaneously expressed limitations in this area. Since over half of the study participants had not completed high school and most spoke Spanish at home, the parents in the focus groups had mixed views on whether they should engage with homework in light of their own limited formal education. For many parents, language was an insurmountable barrier to participation in their children's academic tasks. Moreover, as their children progressed through school, the content and course material became increasingly difficult to understand.

Many parents compromised on a division-of-labor approach to academic involvement. Said one participant, "The parent is obligated to check if the homework was done completely; the teacher is obligated to correct the homework." Other parents engaged with homework tasks by listening to the child read or asking questions about the homework subject. Said another parent, "My children do their homework well, and I ask them questions about it—even if I don't understand [the material]."

Given that most parent respondents did not receive formal education in the United States, suggestions that U.S. schools familiarize parents with the curriculum were usually followed by a heated discussion on whether such an approach would be too time-consuming or costly for the schools. Through such discussions, it became apparent that respondents were uneasy about their qualifications to help their children on high school and middle school academic tasks. One parent was uneasy about a perceived parenting "test" represented in homework tasks, saying "When they give us a project, I sometimes feel that they're trying to find out what kind of parents we are. Some of the projects are so advanced ... [The homework] is not for the education of the child, it is to test the parents."

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**For many parents, language was an insurmountable barrier to participation in their children's academic tasks, especially as their children progressed through school and the material became increasingly difficult.**

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<sup>3</sup> *Educación*, as discussed in Latino families is different from education in that it encompasses social and ethical education, in addition to formal education. *Educación* is a holistic approach to learning and personal improvement. Social status, according to interviews and observations of Latino immigrant families, cannot be achieved without both formal and moral education. For a rich description of this concept, see Reese, L., Balzano, S., Gallimore, R., & Goldberg, C. (1995). The concept of *educación*: Latino family values and American schooling. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 23(1), 57-61.

### **Language Not Always an Issue**

Although language was frequently cited as a barrier to helping students with homework, parents in this study did not feel that language was a hindrance to communicating with teachers and school administrators. Most schools offered bilingual written communication or had bilingual staff and teachers to help translate at parent-teacher meetings. Several parents felt it was not a good idea to rely on children for translating or disseminating information from the school or teacher.

Given the limited nature of existing interactions between schools and parents, it is likely that language is not currently a barrier to communication between educators and Spanish-speaking parents. If communication between the parties were to become more frequent and intimate, existing language accommodations may not be sufficient.

### **Communicating with Schools**

Parents reported that communication activities with schools were impersonal, infrequent, and without adequate notice. As a result, parents felt they did not receive substantive information during their interactions with the school. Report cards, flyers, annual open houses, school-wide parent-teacher conferences, individual and automated phone calls with school representatives, rare visits to schools, and online communications were described as providing little or no personal contact with school officials or teachers. In fact, some parents felt that a problem needed to exist in order for them to contact the teacher. Said one, “If [the students] have a good report card, you don’t have to call.” Parents expressed interest in receiving more personalized, frequent, and timely information about their children’s progress monthly, at least. And although email and web postings may provide after-hours communication alternatives, only the English-speaking groups mentioned this as a vehicle for communicating with teachers.

### **Work Demands**

The most frequently cited reason for low parental participation and communication with schools was a lack of time, the result of demanding and inflexible work schedules. Many Latino parents were hourly workers whose households typically required at least two wage earners. In order to visit with teachers or attend school events during school hours, wages had to be forgone by at least one parent and, in most cases, the parents felt their employment would be at risk if they frequently submitted time-off requests.

### **School Policies**

Parents cited school policies that discourage parental participation. According to one parent, “Teachers push students to be more independent ... like adults,” which rendered the parent less relevant to the child’s education.

Security measures at schools, such as metal detectors and locked gates, seemed to discourage parents from visiting the school and classrooms without an appointment.

Parents also reported that reaching teachers and staff by phone during school hours was difficult because teachers were rarely available by phone during school hours, and they could be placed on hold indefinitely by an inattentive student worker.

## Educators' Perceptions of What Constitutes Parental Involvement in Education

Some of the parental involvement expectations expressed by the teachers, counselors, and principals in this study contrasted with Latino parents' perceptions of parental involvement. For example, teachers, principals, and counselors noted parent-teacher organizations as one form of parental involvement, yet no Latino parents cited those organizations when describing various ways of participating in their child's education.

Interestingly, while teachers referred to behavior monitoring as "parenting," parents in the focus groups referred to these measures as "education [educación] from the home." Also—in contrast with parents—teachers and school administrators felt that back-to-school nights, open houses, and parent-teacher conferences were important and viable venues for parents and teachers to communicate about students' academic progress.

Teachers, school administrators, and counselors noted parent-teacher organizations as a form of parental involvement, yet no Latino parents cited those organizations when describing various ways to participate in their child's education.

### Examples of Expectations of Parental Involvement by Teachers, Counselors, and School Administrators

School Leadership	Administrative Support	Parenting	Academic Support
Participation in school committees	Sewing curtains for a classroom	Monitoring attendance	Helping with homework
PTA membership	Hosting luncheons for faculty	"Controlling kids"/behavioral monitoring	Reviewing report cards
Student advocacy	Attending and staffing at school events	Emotional support	Making sure student completed homework
Community activism	Fundraising	Authoritative parenting	Observing class
	Monitoring the gate	Offering entertainment as a reward and incentive	Seeking tutoring for their children
	Preparing food for events		"Staying on top" of academic progress

## Differences in Strategies to Recruit Parent Participation in School

Teachers, counselors, and principals did not hesitate to attribute high academic achievement to greater parental involvement. As one counselor reported, "The [academic] level of the student is indicative of the level of parental involvement." In fact, four-fifths of the educator respondents felt that parents of high academic performers did not need to be as involved with their children's education as parents of low-performing students.

Yet, on closer examination, it was evident that some teachers and schools involved parents of high-achieving children in more active ways than they did with parents of other students. For example:

A teacher in Miami reported that parents and teachers of gifted children were required to meet twice a year and review the students' academic progress individually—an opportunity not available to all parents due to the high student-to-teacher ratio.

One vice-principal credited parents of honors students with higher school involvement rates due to the parents' presence at annual award assemblies—and yet the parents of honors recipients received personal invitations while other parents were invited via flyers.

One teacher made parent-volunteer requests according to the parents' occupations, stating that parents of students in academically advanced classes were on the school's governing board while others' parents were asked to contribute food for school events. According to the teacher, this



stratification reflected “the reality” that many Latino parents do not speak English and “are not comfortable speaking” at school council meetings. It is unclear if the teacher intentionally confounded a students’ academic achievement with parental occupational status.

The different strategies used to involve parents in schools may be logistically sound, but such reasoning may also result in a parents’ aversion to involvement in activities with less status.

Not all teachers made such drastic distinctions in expectations for parental involvement. Most teachers seemed to limit their personal interactions with parents to situations with negative student behavior or declining academic performance. Unfortunately, if parental participation in school is associated with negative situations, it is unlikely that parents will initiate communication with schools unless prompted by a problem.

### **A Noticeable Absence in the Schools**

In interviews with principals, counselors, and teachers, the absence of an organizational focus on creating long-term, sustainable, or innovative parental involvement programs was noticeable. There did not seem to be a clear organizational vision to increase parental engagement in school.

Teachers felt they had the individual responsibility to design parental involvement opportunities: “It’s more or less in the teacher’s hands for parent involvement, not necessarily the schools,” said one respondent.

Two schools represented in the interviews with teachers had implemented programs that could fundamentally shift the level of parental involvement at the organizational level. One school in Los Angeles started a parent center, which consisted of a parent-run space available for parent gatherings, information dissemination, and event planning. Another school in New York organized 6th grade students into cohorts that remained with the same six teachers for the duration of middle school. The six teachers organized meetings with parents and established a trusting relationship with the parents and students after consecutive years of working with them.

In the absence of an organizational objective to increase parental involvement, teachers and counselors individually experimented with approaches to increase parental involvement. Respondents frequently described effective practices that allowed them to “connect” with parents in a personal manner. Said one, “I need not just tell them ... [what] the kid is getting or how often they’ve been absent. It’s educating them about the whole thing. I try to help them feel comfortable with me, but I listen to them.”

In order to establish such personal and meaningful relationships, it was apparent that speaking Spanish was advantageous for some teachers and counselors. Caring and interested staff may be helpful in increasing parental involvement, but could also have limitations when language barriers exist.

## **Programmatic Initiatives Addressing Parental Involvement in Education**

### **A Wide Range of Programs**

Four types of organizations providing outreach efforts were identified:

- **K-12 Information Dissemination.** These organizations offered training, classes, or informational materials to increase parental involvement and help with academic achievement.

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- **Leadership.** These organizations offered training to build parental leadership skills so that parents could communicate effectively with their children, the school, and teachers.
  - **Training/Advocacy.** These organizations sought to help parents advocate for their child's education. They informed parents on the school political process, media/spokesperson tactics, electoral organizing, and strategy development.
  - **Community Organizing.** These organizations helped parents leverage partnerships to identify and engage in important school issues at the school, district, and community levels.

The study found similarities in organizational methods of recruitment and retention of parent participants; however, key differences were also apparent in organizational mission and program focus. For example, the organizations had extremely varied definitions of parental involvement. Some organizations defined parental involvement very broadly and included non-academic tasks such as advocating for policy issues and teaching leadership skills. Other organizations defined parental involvement more specifically and named tasks such as helping a child with homework, communicating with teachers, or volunteering for the school.

Programmatic and strategic similarities included:

- The organizations sought to empower parents to become key advocates for their children's education through school information workshops, leadership and advocacy training, and organizing around school issues.
- Many programs provided services such as transportation, food, child care, bilingual resources and meeting space in order to facilitate parents' participation.
- The programs established partnerships with schools, school districts, universities, non-profit organizations, the private sector, and community-based organizations in order to better coordinate programming and gain resources.
- Several program directors used post-program evaluations to sharpen the focus of their presentations and programs to the target parent audience.
- Many programs established trust with parents through their relationships with the community and collaborative agreements with local schools and churches.
- All programs performed some variation of program evaluation. Program evaluation was most effective when outcomes measurements were aligned with the program's goals and integrated into the launch of the program.

## Students' Perceptions of the Role of Parental Involvement

### The Importance of Non-academic Support

All of the students who participated in this study were college-bound, not a common occurrence for the broader Latino population. Yet because the respondents were academically successful (and assuming their parents played some role in their success), their parental involvement experiences were an important benchmark to consider.



These students placed emphasis on a kind of parental involvement that was not directly related to academic performance but was reportedly important to their academic success. The students described valuable parental involvement as:

- Telling contrasting stories of examples of failure and success
- Asking questions about the student's day
- Giving general encouragement
- Establishing trust with the student
- Encouraging siblings to look out for each other
- Providing transportation to extracurricular events
- Providing discipline
- Monitoring attendance
- Offering incentives/disincentives for proper behavior

Students placed significant importance on the emotional support and motivation that their parents provided and felt that it was more important than having their parents volunteer at the school or participate in the PTA. In fact, parental presence at school was viewed as an intrusion on their space. Said one, "It's like your parents do not trust you; they are watching you or something." Establishing trust with their parents was also important to their educational success.

### **Providing Strong Elementary School Support**

Most of the students in the focus groups felt their parents had been most—and more effectively—involved in their elementary school education. In elementary school, their parents had established an educational foundation by enforcing school attendance, establishing high expectations for academic performance, and enforcing discipline. These actions became crucial to later educational success.

Students also recalled their parents had been able to assist with homework assignments and attend school meetings such as parent-teacher conferences and open houses more in elementary school than in middle and high school. Students hypothesized that their parents' language barriers and low educational levels played a role in the parents' declining assistance with homework tasks as the student progressed through school.

Realizing that by high school they often had more formal educational experiences than their parents, many students also noted that they were capable of making their own decisions. Although they verified the importance of parental involvement, the students appeared comfortable and at ease in making individual educational choices.

Another noted pivotal factor in their college-bound trajectory was their parents' selection of middle school and high school, which was often not their residence school. This allowed the students to attend schools where college preparation was emphasized more, compared to their local school.

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**Although they verified the importance of parental involvement, the students also felt that they were capable of making individual educational choices.**



## POLICY AND PROGRAMMATIC RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations presented here reflect the findings of the study. All participants were asked to identify the resources and opportunities they would need to increase parental involvement among Latino parents. Some recommendations were directly voiced by the teachers, counselors, principals, parents, and students; other recommendations were extracted from the analysis and findings of the focus groups and interviews.

**The strongest message that can be conveyed from this study is that parental involvement needs to be an organizational expectation if stakeholders are interested in increasing parental involvement.** The recommendations below are ways that policymakers and leaders can establish an organizational culture that encourages Latino parental engagement.

### Recommendations for Policymakers

- Statewide and national accountability requirements and policies should include a reasonable and rigorous measurement of the level of parental involvement in schools. The schools' results on parental involvement measurements should be available to the public.
- Federal, state, or local legislation that encourages or requires employers to allow flex time or work-leave for parents or guardians to attend their children's school activities such as conferences, open houses, and parent-teacher meetings.
- Schools in the study were adequately providing essential communication in Spanish. However, greater Spanish-language fluency among staff is needed to engage parents in more substantial ways. States and school boards should aim to increase Spanish-fluent staff at schools with high concentrations of students from Spanish-dominant households by using incentives or recruitment strategies.
- In order to increase the pool of non-English speakers in schools, federal and state funding can support non-English language learning opportunities for teachers or potential teachers.
- States, funding organizations, and federal agencies can allocate funding for innovative and sound parental-involvement programs in schools. Funding can be given on a competitive basis and target schools with low-academic performance records or programs led in collaboration with parents.
- Funders can support large-scale partnerships between communities, universities, and schools to promote English language, literacy, and computer training for parents in districts facing low academic-achievement trends.

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**The strongest message that can be conveyed from this study is that parental involvement needs to be an organizational expectation if stakeholders are interested in increasing parental involvement.**

### Recommendations for Schools and Organizations

- Schools and school districts should develop and disseminate clear goals and objectives for increasing parental involvement. Objectives should be measurable with measurements reflecting appropriate motivation and incentives.
- School events and activities involving parents should be scheduled during hours and days most convenient for parents. Schools can offer incentives, rewards, and amenities for parents and families to participate in school activities that are accessible to everyone.

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- Clear and objective measurements can be used to compensate teachers with strong records of parental engagement. Flexible meeting times place demands on teachers and counselors and need to be recognized in the distribution of class or student load.
  - Schools can provide professional development opportunities for teachers and staff to share best practices for increasing parental involvement.
  - Parent-leadership committees and organizations at school can recruit a membership pool representative of the student populations and make accommodations to ensure participation from all parents.
  - Assign a physical space on school campuses for parents' exclusive use. A parent center can be used for networking, parent meetings, English classes, naturalization workshops, and college-readiness information sessions. This space should be available evenings and weekends. Assign key teachers as liaisons between the parent center and school staff.
  - Employ DVD technology to introduce parents to the U.S. educational system, school-specific policies, and opportunities for parental involvement. The video can address college preparation, opportunities for after-school activities or tutoring programs, and standardized testing. It also can familiarize parents with a child's annual learning objectives.
  - Organize incentives for parents to accumulate "hours of service" or "volunteer hours" at the schools.
  - Schools and programs should frequently evaluate their interactions and activities with parents. Surveys and interviews can be used to understand parents' preferred involvement practices and how parents evaluate current activities.

### **Recommendations for Teachers**

- Teachers should initiate more positive contacts with parents and not concentrate efforts on interactions for negative reasons.
- Teachers can increase schedule flexibility to increase parental involvement. Specifically, greater flexibility allows for parent-teacher meetings or special event attendance during non-traditional school hours.
- Teachers can solicit "non-traditional" types of contact information, such as alternative home phone numbers or cell phone numbers, phone numbers of relatives, and parents' email addresses.
- Teachers must expend extra energy and resources to successfully engage parents. During the school officials' interviews, multiple respondents felt the teachers who were successful in engaging parents invested more energy and resources than the average teacher.



# STUDY METHODS

## Study Site

Three large metropolitan areas with significant and diverse Latino representation were selected for study sites: Miami, the New York area, and Los Angeles. Cumulatively, 30 percent of all Latinos in the United States reside in these three cities.<sup>4</sup>

## Sample

### Focus Groups with Latino Parents of Middle and High School Students

Three focus groups of eight to ten Latino parents each were held in Miami, the New York area, and Los Angeles. In each city, two focus groups were conducted in Spanish (one with middle school parents, one with high school parents) and one in English and Spanish (including both middle and high school parents). Fifty-three percent of the participants were female and most parents (59 percent) had not graduated from high school. Eighty-five percent of the parents were foreign-born and on average had lived in the U.S. for 21 years. Participants were primarily of Mexican, Cuban, and Puerto Rican origin.

### Interviews with Teachers, Counselors, and School Administrators

From schools represented by the parents of the focus groups, 15 teachers, counselors, and school administrators were recruited to participate in open-ended, 30-minute interviews. Teachers and school administrators represented three different middle schools and two high schools in the New York area, Miami, and Los Angeles. Overall, two counselors, two teachers, and one school administrator from each city participated in the interviews. All interviewees worked at schools that had more than 50 percent minority student enrollment.

### Focus Groups with Students

In Los Angeles, two focus groups with a total of 10 public high school students (juniors and seniors) were conducted. The participants were recruited through an outreach program that provides public high school students who are first in their families to attend college with guidance for college admissions. All participants self-identified as Latino/a, and most had parents of Central American or Mexican origin who had not completed high school.

### Coordinators of Parental Involvement Organizations

Fourteen directors or coordinators of a sample of parental-involvement programs were interviewed. These organizations were identified either through Internet research, independent knowledge of parent-outreach programs, or referrals after interviews. The criterion for an organization to be included in this study was to have an active parental involvement component and serve at least one of three study sites—Los Angeles, New York area, or Miami.

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<sup>4</sup> Chapa, J., & De la Rosa, B. (2004). Latino population growth, socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, and implications for educational attainment. *Education and Urban Society*, 36(2), 130-149

## FOR FURTHER READING

A complete manuscript of this report is available upon request at [trpi@trpi.org](mailto:trpi@trpi.org) or by calling 213-821-5615. Additional references include:

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